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An ambitious plan to unclog the Chicago area's railroad network will receive a boost today.

U.S. Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-3rd), of Willow Springs, will announce on the Southwest Side the launch of CREATE - the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program.

The program, a combination of private and public funds, was devised three years ago to modernize aging railroad infrastructure.

Lipinski said of the \$1.5 billion price tag on CREATE, \$330 million is ready to be spent. The remainder of the money will be spent over the next 10 years, he said.

"The most difficult thing with any project is getting it started," he said. "It will be done in phases."

Lipinski said the initial work will focus on improving the belt railways rimming Chicago and the railroads west of the city. Also getting under way will be the first studies for building underpasses and overpasses where busy streets and rail lines intersect.

Specific projects will be identified later, the congressman said.

Without some progress soon, CREATE faces an uncertain future, he said.

For the first stage of CREATE, \$100 million was awarded through a federal transportation bill. The bill, which covers six years in transportation spending, is up for renewal in 2009.

Lipinski said Congress might not be so generous again without something to show for the first contribution.

"We need to show progress," Lipinski said.

Paying for CREATE is \$900 million in federal funding and \$212 million from the country's six major railroads. The Illinois Department of Transportation is offering to make up the difference.

The program is deemed a project of national significance because one-third of the country's rail cargo moves through Chicago. Delays are common.

"Chicago is a terrible bottleneck because the money has not been spent to modernize the rail system," Lipinski said.

Another aim of the program is reducing expressway congestion by shipping more cargo via rail instead of trucks.

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